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ABSTRACT

Five different ways that viewers conceptualize and take stances toward a photograph are identified from a study that involved 384 written responses to a photograph. Subjects included 63 faculty members from Queensland (Australia) Institute of Technology, 80 school teachers, 67 photographers, and 174 12-year-olds. In focus group discussions, 25 college students discussed a particular photograph. Each viewer brought personal experiences and expectations to create a personal response. The following categories or stances were identified: (1) observation, (2) interpretation, (3) personal memories, (4) participation, and (5) intrusion of the communication medium. Viewers normally took at least two stances, but generally did not take all five, although all stances were included in group discussions. The combination of several stances creates a depth of meaning beyond the initial understanding. (Contains 8 references.) (SLD)

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ED 370 591

Viewers' Contributions to a Photograph

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Viewers' Contributions to a Photograph

Anne L. Russell

Introduction

"I really like the way you have framed the girl sitting on the step and juxtaposed the poster on the door. She is wearing a dress the same colour as the girls' in the poster." Yes, I had framed the shot as I wanted it to be, but I had not been aware of the colour repetition. The viewer contributed to the photograph, something I, as the photographer, had not consciously seen or intended. The viewer added meaning to this photograph for me.

In the viewing of a photograph the photographer will bring the experience of being there, will recall selecting the parameters of the frame and usually recreate the emotional feelings and vision of the total environment beyond the photographic frame. On the other hand, the viewer, who was not behind the camera, and usually not present at the time of shooting, will bring different experiences to the two-dimensional photograph and respond in different ways.

Visual literacy is defined by the International Visual Literacy Association as "a group of visual competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences"; and, "the ability to search for and evaluate visual information in visual media". These definitions suggest viewing visuals is a learned series of skills requiring a viewer to interpret and evaluate a visual through a number of senses. Are all the senses applied by viewers as they look at a photograph?

Elliot Eisner (1993) expresses his concern that 'visual learning' is not a priority in the educational agenda. He believes:

> Visual learning requires an individual to abstract from the world at large those visual qualities that are relevant to some purpose. ... Becoming visually literate is a way of comprehending what visual forms say and how they work (p.84).

Are there distinct ways a viewer comprehends a photograph? The study described in this paper will identify and characterize five different ways viewers conceptualize and take various stances towards a photograph in order to create personal understanding. The five different stances are Observation, Interpretation, Personal Memories, Participation and Medium Intrusion. Implications will be considered which encourage students to use these different constructs in the viewing of photographs.

The Photographer or creator of the image

The photographer decides consciously, or unconsciously, on how to position the elements of the scene within the frame. Consideration is made of lens, depth of field, exposure, film type, which elements to exclude and angle of view.

> For despite the widely held belief that 'the camera never lies', photographers can, through choices of what, how and when to take their pictures, exert a strong influence on how a particular

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'reality' is depicted (Blyton, 1987:423).

The photographer 'sees' an event or a moment s/he decides to record. In recording the image on film s/he takes a 'minute time sample - a hundredth-of-a-second slice of reality' (Collier & Collier, 1986:13). This time sample is presented to show what existed at one time in a certain space. For Berger & Mohr,

> Photographs quote from appearances. The taking out of the quotation produces a discontinuity, which is reflected in the ambiguity of a photograph's meaning. All photographed events are ambiguous, except to those whose personal relation to the event is such that their own lives supply the missing continuity. Usually, in public the ambiguity of photographs is hidden by the use of words which explain, less or more truthfully, the pictured events (1986:128).

How is the ambiguity of a non-annotated photograph dealt with? How do viewers make meaning of an image presented without explanation? In daily living, and over time, individuals have come to learn how to make their own sense of images. While a photograph is a quotation created in a specific way by a photographer, each viewer brings personal experiences, expectations and a specific context to the photograph. These personal attributes influence how the viewer thinks about, and reacts to, the image in a particular way.

The Viewer or interpreter of the image

A group of people in the same context and given the same instructions for responding to a photograph will each bring personal expectations and experiences to their response.

The expectation of viewing a photograph and the context for viewing it can influence how an individual reacts to a photograph. In a learning situation, both the teacher and the learner will have preconceived ideas about the intended content of the image. Nevertheless, in one classroom there will be many different interpretations.

In their visual literacy education program, Buckle and Kelley identified three categories of response to photographs:

> Obvious observations ("This place is in a town or a city"), valid inferences ("It is most likely to be near the one-way system because of the right turn only sign") or judgements ("It brings out the busy, 'city gent' side of London") (1990:27).

Valid inferences may be true for the photographer and some viewers, but may not in fact have a basis for truth. It is this point when the inferences become judgements.

The contributions a viewer can offer in relation to a visual text has not been a major focus in visual literacy. Martinez (1992) writes of his concern with students of anthropology who construct textual meanings from film. He believes:

> We need to move from the dominance of author-text to a theoretical consideration of the viewer / reader as a powerful source of signification in the construction of anthropological knowledge (p.132).

Martinez (1992:133) says reception theories relating to literary texts "have been assimilated into mass media and film studies. These theories can be applied to visual texts".

Rosenblatt (1982:268) describes reading as a transaction or 'a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances'. She suggests there are two stances a reader may take when interacting with text - efferent (seeking information) or aesthetic (creating a personal story).

Perhaps there are more stances a viewer can take when looking at a photograph.

The study

The aim of this study was to discover qualitatively different ways individuals respond to a photograph. The research questions were:

1. Are there qualitatively different stances individuals can take when they respond to a photograph?

2. Will the photographic content influence the qualitatively different stances in which individuals respond to a photograph?

The data for the study were gathered from several different types of respondents. A total of 384 written responses to a photograph were gathered. Respondents include 63 academic staff from Queensland University of Technology; 80 school teachers; 67 photographers from amateur Camera Clubs; and, 174 twelve year old school students. All respondents live in Brisbane, Queensland Australia. The percentage of males and females was not recorded.

Primarily written responses to photographs were elicited. Each person was shown a photograph and asked to write thoughts which came to his/her mind as s/he viewed the photograph. Respondents spent between five and ten minutes writing their responses.

In addition, 25 first year students in the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology participated in synergetic focus group discussions where they discussed a particular photograph. The five discussion groups were recorded and transcribed and the transcriptions used in the analysis of the data.

In the case of the majority of the school teachers and University academic staff the responses were elicited in relation to instruction related to the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. In most cases the respondents were each given a 20cm x 25cm size photograph or the group was shown a slide. In two cases an overhead transparency of the photograph was used as the stimulus for response. The photographic camera club respondents were asked to write in response to a slide shown to the whole group as a preliminary activity before being introduced to the concept of different ways to respond to photographs and implications for Camera Club judging.

The data from each group were pooled to create one body of data. Analysis of data employed a phenomenographic approach to discover categories of responses which suggest different stances towards viewing a photograph.

No attempt was made to teach visual literacy to the respondents or to talk about different ways to respond to photographs. The photographs were not shown in a context which related to their content.

Two distinctly different photographic images were used in the research (see illustrations on following page). The first photograph was of five Indian children in the desert walking towards the photographer. The second photograph looks down on a car park where cars are parked within the marked areas of the concrete, one car has been burnt out. Both photographs were presented in colour. These two photographs were selected to provide a contrast in subject content to ensure the nature of the image did not influence the categories of response. In fact both images elicited all five categories of response.

Analysis of data

Though the data were collected in several different circumstances, the analysis was not focussed on differences between type of respondent. At this stage of the research it was important to consider the total data in order to consider diversity, and from this diversity to identify

'The Desert Children' and 'Car Park' photographs used for the study

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categories of qualitatively different types of responses to photographs.

A phenomenographic approach was used to analyse the data.

> Phenomenography is a research method for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise (sic), perceive , and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them (Marton, 1986:31).

Using this method, the data were analysed to provide categories of description which indicate distinctly different approaches viewers have toward a photograph. The individual respondent is not the focus of analysis, rather the variations of experiences are paramount in phenomenographic analysis. It was not, therefore, relevant to identify specific categories of respondent, instead all data were bundled together and treated as one unit for analysis.

The data were read and re-read to identify quotations which illustrated different responses to show a specific stance or approach toward the content of the photograph. Quotations from the data were grouped into categories according to apparent distinct stances. The categories were given names and then the researcher explained the uniqueness of each category to colleagues and photographers. Where the description of a category was not easily understood, the quotes were reviewed to identify if they were unique and needed renaming or whether they belonged in one of the other categories. The meanings of the categories became clear and descriptions of the categories were tested and adjusted and retested against the data. Quotations from the data illustrate how each category was exemplified by respondents. This process of phenomenographic analysis is further described by Marton (1986:42-43).

Results

Viewers contributed many different insights to both photographs. Each viewer brought personal experiences and expectations to create a personal response or stance to the photograph.

Five categories or stances were identified from the data:

Observation
Interpretation
Personal Memories
Participation
Medium Intrusion.

While each viewer normally took at least two stances when they viewed the photograph, they normally did not include all of the stances in their individual response. However, all stances were included in each group discussion where five individuals discussed one photograph.

Each category is presented with a description of meaning to show how the specific stance can be recognized and how it is used in written or verbal response to a photograph. The word 'elements' has been used in this context to indicate the visible images which appear on the surface of a photograph. These form the visual content of the photograph.

Observation

The photograph is seen as a series of observable elements. The viewer observes and tries to identify the visible elements contained within the photograph and verbally lists the visual contents. Detail seen by the eye is reported, clarified or described by the viewer. The photographic elements are objectively observed in their two dimensional context.

The Desert Children photograph elicited the following observation responses:

> *Sand, trees, desert, people, rocks, shadows, clothes.*

The first thing that struck me was their thin bony legs and arms and their thin little faces with dark circled eyes. Not one child is smiling.

The Car Park photograph elicited the following observation responses:

Geometric patterns of lines - fence, parking bays, angular shapes, pyramid arrangement of parked cars.

A series of cars in 2 rows, aligned at sharp angles, on a dark, ugly concrete floor.

Interpretation

The photograph is seen as a stimulus for interpretation. The viewer tries to create meaning from the visible elements, either singly or in combination, according to personal expectations and understanding of the context. Subjective meaning is verbally explained or questions asked which would assist in interpretation. Elements or combinations of elements in the photograph are seen and meaning is given by the viewer. The viewer's interpretation of the photograph may, or may not, be the intended interpretation of the photographer. The photographic elements are subjectively interpreted to create a context which is meaningful for the viewer.

The Desert Children photograph elicited the following interpretative responses:

Sickness, sand burning their feet, no learning facilities, beds (hard), sometimes happy, sometimes sad, hot in summer.

These children look quite forlorn and sad. The area also looks dry and hot. I wonder what the children do all day.

The Car Park photograph elicited the following interpretative response:

Did the damage happen in that location? If not why was it put there?

Little freedom. Only form of rebellion is to face the other way.

Personal Memories

The photograph is seen as a stimulus to recall personal experiences. The viewer 'leaves' the photograph in order to recall personal memories from the past. A story or stories are verbally recounted by the viewer. Visible elements or combinations of elements in the photograph may have stimulated the viewer's memory. The viewer's reflections may, or may not, extend the meaning in a way related to the intended interpretation of the photographer. The visible elements 'send' the viewer to a different environmental context.

The Desert Children photograph elicited the following personal memory responses:

They remind me of a very 'backward' community which I visited in Sumatra

Reminds me of the kids I saw in Egypt.

The Car Park photograph elicited the following personal memory responses:

Shopping - it reminds me of shopping and the to and fro to the carpark.

It reminds me of the story "Weight of Thistledown".

Participation

The photograph is seen as a stimulus for imaginative participation. The viewer 'enters' the environment depicted in the photograph as if participating in the scene, either from behind the camera or in front of the camera. The viewer's descriptions of elements beyond the frame of the photograph are often supported by descriptions of emotional feelings and kinaesthetic sensations. The imagined participation may not be the same as it was for the photographer. The viewer becomes

engaged in the visible elements to the extent of imagining what it would be like to be there and so becomes involved within the environment where the photograph was taken.

The Desert Children photograph elicited the following participative responses:

There is a sadness and a longing about them and I would love to reach out and hold them - talk to them, play with them - be there for them.

Village around on left of picture towards trees.

The Car Park photograph elicited the following participative responses:

I feel like a bird looking down on a dreary parking lot. It is ugly and the Only thing that attracted my attention was the bright colours of the red and white cars.

I am looking out the window of my office. It's just another sort of 'ordinary' day. The boss is here. I can see his flash blue car. Wonder who owns the others. I don't recognize them.

Medium Intrusion

The image is seen as a specific communication medium related to the photographer and the camera as a recording device. The viewer considers the psychological or technical aspects of the medium. The viewer will raise questions or comments related to technical qualities of the photograph, the nature of photography as a medium, or, questions related to the purpose for the photograph. The 'noise' or intrusion of the medium may not have been intended by the author. The visible elements of the photograph, or the context of viewing the photograph, may encourage the viewer to dwell on the context of viewing, or the context of the production of, the photograph. The viewer leaves the environment created by the visual contents to explore aspects of the communication medium itself.

The Desert Children photograph elicited the following medium intrusion responses:

The photograph would stimulate discussion on [topics such as] where (which country), clothing, language, beliefs, is this a family group?

I believe that the impact would have been stronger if the shot was taken in black and white.

A tourist snapshot.

The Car Park photograph elicited the following medium intrusion responses:

This slide was hard to look at due to 1. its position in relation to me, 2. from where it was taken.

What a waste of film.

Discussion

As a viewer takes a particular stance when responding to a photograph, s/he makes decisions regarding the social contexts of the photograph. The social contexts include identifying the conditions under which the photograph was taken and the context of present viewing conditions.

The photographer visually gives clues regarding the relationship s/he has with the visual content and the context when the photograph was taken. The desert children and car park photographs suggest two different contexts and stances. The subjective and personal perspective offered in the relationship between the photographer and the desert children is in opposition to the objective and factual stance presented in the car park image. The very use of the two words 'offered' and 'presented' in the previous sentence suggest a difference between providing content to be interacted with in a subjective manner and content to be taken as objective fact.

The desert children appear to be unfamiliar with the photographer and seem to question what the photographer has to offer them. There is a relationship between the photographer and the children. The viewers who responded in this research were predominately white Australians and related to the children as if they were from another culture. Subjective responses are given within the interpretation, personal memories, and participation categories.

The bird's eye view of the car park does not suggest a close relationship between the photographer and the visual elements depicted. It may be that the social context for the car park is much more objective in suggesting elements to be regarded as factual representations of reality. Objective responses are given within the observation and medium intrusion categories.

The two photographs were selected for the research as the photographer has taken different stances.

While it was not the intention of this research to determine the quantitative differences of response categories evoked by different types of image, both images elicited subjective as well as objective responses. Thus it appears the five identified categories can be applied to both subjective and objective image formats.

The viewer's social context when the photograph is viewed is important when considering how to respond to the image. In this research the researcher was known to the majority of the adult respondents. The knowledge that the researcher would be non-judgmental about the responses allowed the respondents to react as they wished. The student respondents did not know the researcher and may have tried to guess what was wanted. In both cases responses fell into all five categories.

When a viewer expects a photograph to give factual information, s/he will explore the image to find a reconstruction of aspects of the 'real' world. In Rosenblatt's (1982) view the viewer is taking an efferent stance in seeking information. The elements within the frame will be consulted to determine exactly what is present and how each element relates to each other (observation category). These elements will be further judged (interpretation category) and possibly related to relevant past cultural experiences (personal memories category) in order to integrate the new information gained from the photograph to present intellectual knowledge. The viewer will add to prior knowledge and create new meanings of reality based on interactions between the information presented in the photograph and prior understanding.

When the image does not conform to 'meaningful reality' the viewer may focus on technical aspects of the photograph such as quality of exposure, composition of the elements, or a concern about the purpose for the photograph (medium intrusion category). In this case the representation of the 'reality' is at odds with the viewer's perceived reality and this incongruity becomes a focus for the viewer.

A viewer who wishes to create meaning beyond a factual representation of 'reality' will approach the photograph with a different perspective. The viewer creates a personal story or personal meaning which does not need to relate to the photographer's intended meaning. In Rosenblatt' s (1982) terms this is an aesthetic stance. A more wholistic overview rather than a concern with specific elements will stimulate the viewer to move beyond the represented reality to other conceptions of reality or to conceptions of fantasy. In this case the interpretation (interpretation category) is not a judgement of the elements presented in the photograph. The personal memories category also falls into Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance as the viewer responds with the memory of a personal story. The aesthetic stance is also demonstrated when the viewer mentally transports her/him self to the context or environment (participation category) 'within' the frame and describes what it is like to be there.

Application to teaching and learning

In this paper I have concentrated on the viewer's responses to photographs. In developing visual literacy among students the five categories of response could be used as cues for different stances to take when responding to a photograph. In using the five stances it is interesting to note the kinaesthetic responses which are given when people take a participation stance. The act of imagining one is present in the scene seems to elicit tactile and other sensory sensations. This reflects the International Visual Literacy Association's definition which suggests integration of senses beyond seeing is important for development of visual literacy.

As indicated in the definitions of visual literacy, it is equally important for students to have the ability to create visuals. In this respect the five categories could be used as foci for making (framing, selection of perspective and technical aspects) a photograph. The student could take five different photographs of the same topic, from each of the five different stances presented in this paper.

Both the responses to photographs and the creation of photographs by students can be applied in instructional design when producers consider what type of responses will be elicited as learners view a photograph. The inclusion of activities involving students in making their own photographs to illustrate certain concepts can create a deep understanding of the nature of the concept.

Conclusion

Each viewer makes individual contributions to a photograph. A specific photograph can elicit many different responses which create new meanings beyond those intended by the photographer. The viewer can observe detail, interpret meaning, recall personal memories of other times and other places, and can imagine participating in the scene or being where the photographer was when the photograph was taken. In addition, the physical aspects of the photograph or concern about the purpose of the visual content may intrude on the message presented by the photographer.

When a number of viewers respond to the same photograph they will bring additional meanings to those of just one viewer or of the photographer. The combination of several stances taken when responding to a photograph will create a depth of meaning beyond initial understanding.

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